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OF LAST CHANCE GULCH***

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# **The Cruse Tragedy**

## **Tommy, Maggie, and Mamie**

### **Riches and great respect, followed by loneliness and early deaths**

The City of Helena recently installed a splendid wrought iron fence, which now borders the parking lot of the public library. This beautiful piece of work was bestowed on the city in memory of Alma Pauly Everett, a long-time Helena resident. A small plaque explains that the fence once graced the home of wealthy Thomas Cruse, a man whose name most Helenans recognize.

Those who have ridden the tour train know that Thomas Cruse donated substantially to the building of St. Helena Cathedral - a quarter of a million dollars, to be exact. Others may recognize his name on that Urban Renewal cut-through, Cruse Avenue. Still others may recall the huge mausoleum in Resurrection Cem-

etery, ostentatiously marked with his name for all passerby to see.

Many may not know that Cruse also bought and carried the bonds (when no one else would) that eventually built the state's Capitol Building. The legendary wealth and star-crossed life of Thomas Cruse thus had a far-reaching impact on the Helena community. The short text of the plaque can only hint that there is much more to the story of this colorful character.

Thomas Cruse, affectionately called "Tommy" by old-timers who knew him, was a stubborn Irishman who came to Helena in 1867 so impoverished and down on his luck that he spent his first night huddled under a blanket on the street.

Despite the ridicule of other miners who urged him to give up, several years went by while Cruse kept looking for his pot of gold. He worked his mine west of Helena from its tiny opening, crawling down to the workings and taking time off only to venture into Helena for supplies. After long months of back-breaking labor on hands and knees, Cruse began to take significant gold ore out of Drum Lummon Mine. Later, with borrowed capital he established Lewis and Clark County's first amal-



*The Cruse mansion was razed so a modern apartment building could be built.*

*Photos courtesy of Montana Historical Society.*

gamated silver stamp mill at the town he named Marysville in 1878. Less than a decade after, Cruse was a rich and well-respected man.

On a sparkling snow-covered March morning in 1886, the crusty fifty-year-old Cruse wed twenty-five-year-old Margaret Carter sister of U.S. Senator Thomas H. Carter. Helena had not before, nor perhaps has it since, seen such a celebration. To the merry chime of sleigh bells, "large throngs of people from every part of the city moved with common impulse" toward the Cathedral of the Sacred Hearts on Helena's Catholic hill.

The bride wore a gorgeous gown of cream silk trimmed in Spanish lace with a court train and lace overdress; the maid of honor wore cream Albatross cloth trimmed in ruby velvet. Cruse sported a "black diagonal" with Prince Albert coat, white gloves and tie.

The scent of orange blossoms and other exotic blooms, from local florists' stock and shipped from as far away as Portland and St. Paul, perfumed the frosty air. Champagne, claret, port and wine punch flowed freely at the reception in the separate men's and ladies' parlors in the Cosmopolitan Hotel. When the buffet was served, tables groaned under a dazzling display of turkeys, chickens, quail, roast meats, elaborate cakes, ices and other delectable desserts. A huge crowd of well-wishers partied far into the night.

But on New Year's Eve just ten months later in the same cathedral, candles surrounded the black velvet-draped casket of Thomas Cruse's beloved wife, Maggie. Mrs. Cruse had apparently been of nervous temperament, and following the birth of a daughter December 15, she had received a "...larger dose of medicine than was prescribed, and her nerves were the more affected." It was not known if this caused her death or merely contributed to her nervous state. Officially, Maggie succumbed to "nervous prostration following her confinement."

The child, Mary Margaret, was nicknamed "Mamie." Because of his vast wealth, Cruse feared that his only child might be kidnapped and so she led a very sheltered life behind the iron fence of her father's mansion at 328 Benton Avenue.

No doubt Mamie was spoiled; she possessed everything her heart desired except the freedom of

other children. She was stubborn and strong-willed like her father even as a very young child. Mamie scandalized children even younger than she by playing in the aisles and making noise during Sunday Mass, a serious transgression discussed in more than one Catholic household.

When Mamie was 17, she eluded her father and ran away with her sweetheart. The couple got as far as Elliston before Cruse caught up with them and made the grave mistake of fetching her home. Thus the tragic course which eventually led to her early demise was set in motion.

Helena Lester Loble knew Mamie and her father. He writes that "...this delightful and beautiful little girl grew to womanhood dreaming of the world beyond the iron fence." After the interrupted elopement, Mamie was sent away to school and into a world that was not always kind to her.

Marriage to Wall Street broker Alvar O'Brien in 1909 ended in divorce. It was rumored that her father disliked her husband and sent him packing. A second marriage in 1911, to Harry Cotter went unrecognized by Cruse whose religion did not permit divorce. He persisted in reminding Mamie that she was "living in sin."

Finally estranged from Cotter and, according to her father, addicted to alcohol, the police plucked her from a roadhouse just outside Butte and returned her to Helena in the fall of 1913. Amidst rumor and scandal, suffering from an illness that proved fatal, Mamie was placed into the care of the sisters of the House of the Good Shepherd. Mamie came home to the house on Benton Avenue just a few days before her death. The newspaper reported: "Her death came as the result of an illness that entailed much suffering, but which she endured with admirable fortitude." We can only speculate about what exactly caused her death; Cruse made sure the specifics were not recorded.

Mamie died on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, 1913. Helena then mourned not just the loss of Cruse's only child, but also seemed to realize that the tragic event signaled the beginning of the end of Thomas Cruse and the generosity of this most benevolent patron. Mamie's obituary carried not much about her short life. Rather, it contained a lengthy account of her father's contributions, and profuse appreciation for his "devotedness to the

community's advancement."

A lawsuit the following spring was brought against Cruse by Mamie's husband, challenging her will. This was very hard on Cruse. Witnesses in the scathing courtroom drama included Bishop Carroll and the mother superior of the House of the Good Shepherd. In the course of the trial, Mamie's name was "blackened and besmirched." Loble recalls seeing her father sitting, dejected and alone, on the steps of his mansion.

Thomas Cruse contracted a bad cold and died on December 20, 1914, rich and unhappy. His beloved cathedral was dedicated five days later on Christmas Day. That his funeral was the first Mass celebrated in the splendid cathedral which he had helped to finance is therefore a myth. It was, however, the second service and certainly the first funeral in the new church.

For many more years, the 22-room Cruse mansion presided over



*Mamie as a young girl.*

its prestigious corner at Lawrence Street and Benton Avenue. The home had been built in the early 1880s as the residence of T.C. Power. Ironically, Cruse purchased it because he was superstitious about living in a home he had built himself. The grand residence had five Italian tile fireplaces and floors of cherry and mahogany.

In 1963, the house fell victim to progress and was torn down to make room for a modern apartment building. Belle Winestine agonized over this final indignity: "And the clouds of dust that billowed up as the chunks of brick wall collapsed...within its handsome iron fence, sent up memories of our childhood..."

Happily, the fence was rescued. There remains, however, one final irony to complete this story of Tommy Cruse and his family: the wrought iron fence, a piece of art and a Helena treasure now beckons patrons to the public library. One has to wonder how Cruse himself would view this placement because even though he was an uncanny businessman and founder of a highly successful bank, Thomas Cruse never learned to read.

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